



State Senator

PAULA DOCKERY

District 15- Serving parts of Polk, Hernando, Osceola, Sumter, and Lake Counties



Dear Neighbor,

The busy 2004 Legislative Session that came to an end on April 30 was described by many lawmakers as a productive, dynamic session. This seems the perfect opportunity to share some of the significant legislation we passed for the benefit of our local community. Though I love being in Tallahassee and working on behalf of my constituents, I can say without hesitation that it is good to be home!

Striving to improve the quality of life for all Floridians, this year the Legislature addressed issues such as the implementation of Universal Pre-K, improved access to affordable health care, protection of our water resources, and a more balanced formula to distribute funding to our school districts. We passed a balanced budget for the state, encompassing over \$58 billion in spending for Florida's families, education, neighborhoods, and environment. Designed to limit the appropriation of non-recurring money for recurring projects, the Senate's budget was based on reform, efficiency, and quality.

It is my goal to begin working on legislation that I plan to introduce during the 2005 Legislative Session. Continuing the implementation of voter-mandated amendments to Florida's Constitution, including providing Universal Pre-Kindergarten for Florida's children, reducing class sizes in schools across the state, and building a high-speed rail system, are of utmost importance to me. Additionally, I look forward to further addressing the process of amending Florida's Constitution. Our goal is the creation of a balance between maintaining our citizens' ability to amend the Constitution and protecting the integrity of Florida's most sacred document.

Another objective we will continue to work on is the creation of a "state spending plan," which will provide a long-range fiscal plan for the state and limit the Legislature from using temporary sources of money for programs that must be funded every year. It is crucial that we continue to fund the essential programs that benefit and enhance the quality of life for Floridians while at the same time working towards protecting our children and grandchildren from the burden of accumulated debt.

Please continue to stay involved, communicate your ideas, and share your concerns with me. As both your Senator and neighbor, I appreciate each call, letter and, e-mail informing me of which issues are important to the members of our community. It is my pleasure to address the critical needs of our state and work with you to make our communities brighter.

Warm Regards,

Paula
Paula

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Legislation by Senator Dockery

Below are highlights of some of the bills I introduced that passed both Chambers and were signed into law by Governor Bush.

Senate Bill 2000, KidCare

One of the first bills passed during this legislative session and signed by the Governor on March 11, 2004, was Senate Bill 2000, relating to KidCare. KidCare is a unique program that provides low-cost health insurance to children in Florida whose parents do not have access to health insurance through their place of employment or other means.

The waiting list for this insurance had grown to over 90,000 children when the federal government announced that Florida was eligible for other states' unused children's health care dollars. Senate Bill 2000 appropriated \$25 million in state and federal dollars to take all those children off the waiting list immediately in the current year. By maximizing these federal and state dollars, the Legislature believes we can keep the KidCare program funded through 2007, when the program will need reauthorization at the federal level to continue.

An additional \$149.2 million was allocated for the children currently enrolled in KidCare and to enroll those children placed on the waiting list from January 30 - March 11, 2004 who were not originally considered for enrollment by Senate Bill 2000 for the upcoming fiscal year. With this addendum, it is estimated that 430,000 children will receive health insurance coverage by June 30, 2005.

Senate Bill 2566, Absentee Ballots

In previous elections, with every absentee ballot that was returned, the Supervisor of Elections verified the voter's signature. The witness signature on each ballot was not checked against anything, thus the requirement for a witness signature has not been a protection against fraud. This bill removes the requirement for a witness signature on absentee ballots, making it easier for those elderly voters who cannot get out of the house or those voters who are out of town, to vote for their desired candidate by absentee ballot. This bill ensures that every absentee ballot that is returned with the voter's signature will be counted. In the 2002 election, approximately 2500 ballots were not counted due to the lack of a witness signature.

SB 1104 and SB 1142, Water Resources (passed as HB 293)

This significant piece of legislation further protects our vital water resources by strengthening the link between future development and available water supplies. Also, we provided water utilities with the ability to create water conservation programs that better fit the needs of the consumers they serve. To protect water resources in the most heavily developed areas in the state, we authorized the South Florida Water Management District and the Department of Environmental Protection to look at alternative ways to store water in South Florida so that groundwater supplies are increased and the aquifer is protected.



Senator Dockery releasing a bass at the ribbon cutting for the Bass Conservation Center in Sumter County.

We aren't just protecting our groundwater resources though – we are also protecting our surface water bodies. The water management districts are authorized to require the use of reclaimed water when it is technically and economically feasible, and the districts are required to work with interested parties to develop landscape irrigation and xeriscape design standards for new construction. The use of water-friendly plants and vegetation in our local communities will help protect all of our water resources and keep us green at the same time. Lastly, we demanded that state agencies bear some of the burden of water conservation by requiring that those agencies also use reclaimed water to the greatest extent practicable for purposes such as landscape irrigation.

As chairman of the Home Defense, Public Security and Ports Committee, I sponsored the following bills:

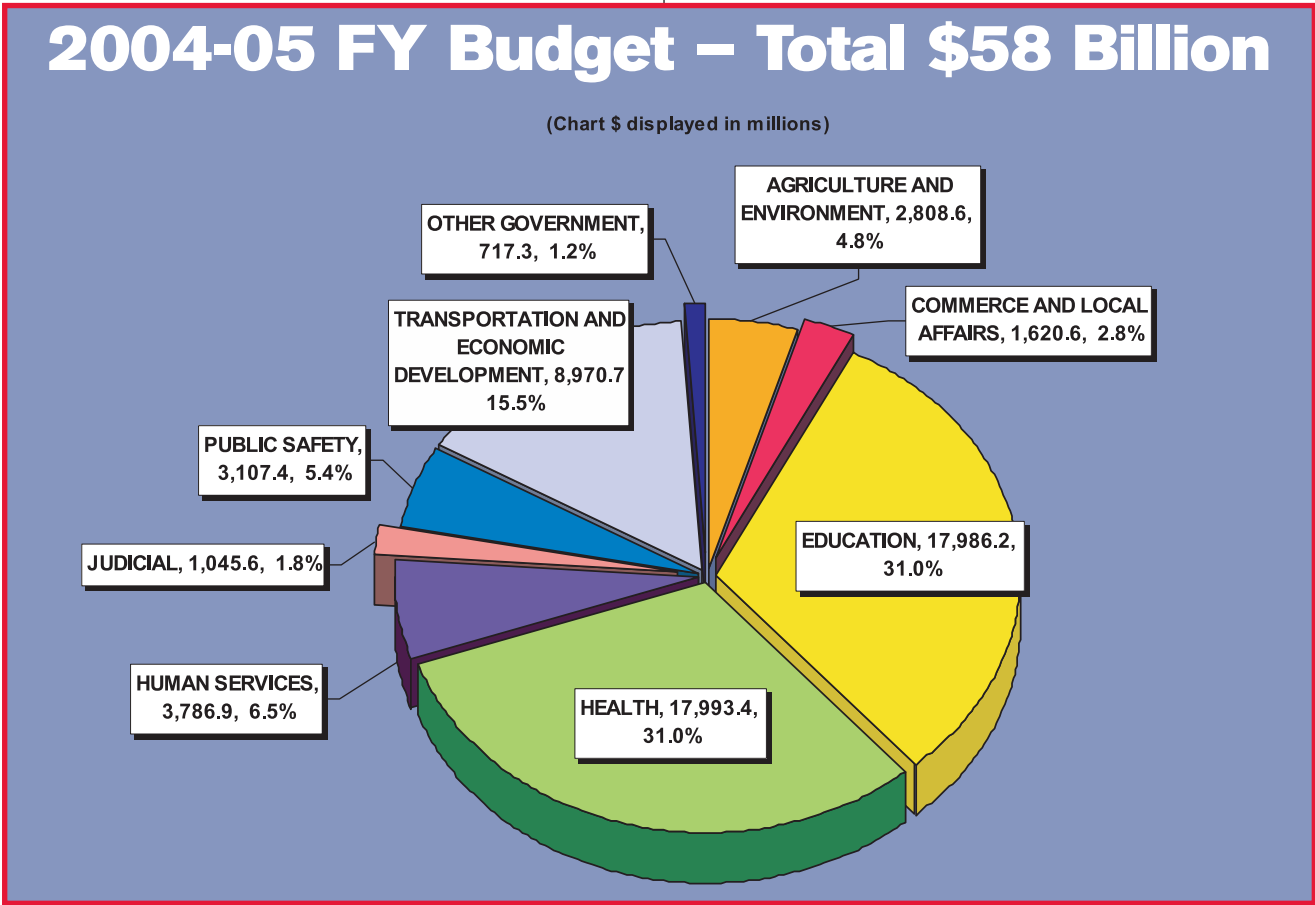
Senate Bill 1820, Domestic Security - sets a deadline of November 2005 for all Florida public seaports to be in compliance with Florida Statutes. Failure to be in compliance may result in a legislative review of the operations and funding of the seaport. This bill also creates the Florida Institute for Nuclear Detection and Security (FINDS)

at the University of Florida. The purpose of the institute is to conduct cutting-edge research and develop systems and sensors capable of detecting the importation and transport of nuclear materials, devices and equipment within the State of Florida.

Senate Bill 130, Name Change Petitions - requires anyone seeking a name change to submit a set of their fingerprints with their request, with the exception of a person who is having a former name restored. This bill will improve the state's ability to assure its records remain current and minimize the possibility that someone will mask his or her identity through a series of name changes.

Senate Bill 124, Domestic Security Initiatives - requires all state agencies, universities and colleges to perform vulnerability self assessments on public property and encourages local governments and water management districts to do the assessments.

Senate Bill 2562, Money Laundering - provides the Department of Financial Services with additional enforcement tools to assist in the regulation of money transmitters, and allows for a service charge to be collected by money transmitters for identity and account verification to prevent fraud.



Education Funding

The Legislature made education a priority yet again this year, as quality instruction for our children is crucial to Florida’s continued development. Since 1996, the Legislature has significantly increased education funding and expanded programs every year. Two of this year’s education funding issues were the public school funding formula and community college and state university funding.

Pre-Kindergarten Program

Applicable to all Floridians with young children is House Bill 821, which creates the Florida Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) Education Program within the Department of Education (DOE). In 2002, Florida voters approved an amendment to the State Constitution that requires the Legislature to establish a new early childhood education program for every 4-year-old child in the state. This bill implements that amendment, thereby allowing parents to enroll their children in a voluntary, free Pre-K program offered during the year before the child is eligible for admission to kindergarten.

Public School Funding Formula

Approximately \$18 billion of the state’s \$58 billion budget for 2004-2005 is dedicated for Florida’s public schools. However, one of the most contentious issues of the Session was the Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP) used to ensure uniformity in public school funding, particularly the District Cost Differential (DCD). The purpose of the DCD is to adjust public school funding, which is largely spent by school districts on personnel, for the cost of hiring equally qualified personnel across districts with differing labor market conditions.

The revised DCD, as approved by the Legislature during the most recent session, uses an improved Florida Price Level Index which continues to use the cost of purchasing the same market basket of goods and services, but then adds wages for over 700 occupations across all 67 counties. As a result, the new DCD more fairly distributes funds to school districts.

For the counties in District 15, this change will bring increased amounts of funding for the 2004-05 school year. The amounts are as follows: Hernando County- \$188,143, Lake County- \$1,278,385, Osceola County- \$918,365, Polk County- \$3,142,322. In Sumter County, the new formula will produce a slight decrease in funding of \$33,849; however, \$32,430 in transition supplements will be provided to soften this initial decrease. While a handful of districts had a decrease in funds this year, it is anticipated that the new index will, over time, be more stable.

Community Colleges and State Universities

Long recognized as one of the finest community college systems in the nation, Florida’s 28 community colleges provide a unique opportunity for students of all ages to receive advanced degrees. Recognizing the integral role these institutions play in our state, the 2004 Legislature provided \$50.8 million in state matching funds to eliminate the backlog of operating challenge grant donations across the state. An additional \$68.7 million is provided for enrollment growth and enhancement funding.



FFA students from Hernando County visit Senator Dockery’s Tallahassee office during Session.

Noted for both academics and athletics, the state’s 12 universities offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in a variety of areas. To aid funding at the state’s universities, the Legislature provided \$61.3 million to fund the Board of Governors’ recommended enrollment plan. An additional \$96.8 million is provided to fund the backlog of matching funds to the Major Gifts Program.

Recognizing that keeping the cost of higher education affordable is a priority of many Floridians, the Legislature sought to preserve the fiscal integrity of the Florida Prepaid Tuition Program by keeping tuition increases within actuarial limitations. Increases were limited to 5% for the state’s community colleges and 7.5% for resident undergraduate students.

Florida’s Bright Futures Scholarship Program affords students an opportunity to pursue higher education without saddling them or their families with high-interest student loans. Created by the Legislature in 1997, Bright Futures Scholarships are Florida Lottery-funded scholarships intended to reward students for their academic excellence and achievements by providing them with financial assistance to pursue postsecondary educational and career goals. This year, the Bright Futures Scholarships Program is fully funded with a \$33.5 million increase over last year’s funding levels.

A college degree is a priceless tool as today’s young people seek success. Florida’s community colleges and state universities offer tomorrow’s leaders the opportunity to make all of their aspirations come to fruition. The Legislature’s commitment to funding these institutions is indicative of its desire to see a better quality of life for all Floridians.

Legislation Passed for Military Families

The Legislature demonstrated its commitment to the military with measures that create a supportive environment for servicemen and their families based in Florida. The measures will:

- provide for a smooth transition for children of military families coming into Florida’s education system
- allow for unemployment compensation for military spouses who voluntarily resign from jobs to keep the family intact due to deployment or relocation
- require all public school classrooms to display an American Flag by 2005
- allow tenants the right to display the American Flag regardless of rental agreement provisions

This legislation will give a little back to those who give so much of themselves to assure our freedom.



Battling the Rising Costs of Health Care

In Florida, we have developed one of the nation’s best health care systems, but there are many areas that need continued improvement. Health care is and will continue to be a major priority of the Florida Senate. As the costs of health care continue to rise and health insurance increasingly becomes a luxury that many Floridians cannot afford, we must continue down the path of finding new and innovative approaches to enhancing the health of our citizens.

This year we took a giant step in the right direction with the passing of a comprehensive health care bill aimed at increasing Floridians’ access to affordable health care and health insurance. Specifically, the legislation addresses the availability of health care information to consumers, health insurance for low-income and uninsurable citizens, and increased health care quality and safety. For example, small businesses in Florida are having a difficult time providing affordable insurance for their employees, so this bill will allow these businesses to band together to form larger purchasing pools in order to seek better insurance rates. The legislation also expands the Health Flex Program statewide, which will allow insurers, local governments, HMOs and others to sell basic, low-cost health insurance policies.

The legislation seeks to make information regarding health care options more accessible to Floridians by requiring health care facilities to include specific information on their websites and to provide a written estimate of charges upon written request. The legislation also creates the Florida Patient Safety Corporation to assist health care providers in improving the quality and safety of health care. In addition, the legislation aims to alleviate emergency room overcrowding by allowing hospitals and health centers to develop emergency room diversion programs.

These are just some of the highlights of this multi-faceted affordable health care legislation. Because of this bill, health care consumers will be empowered to make more informed choices on where to receive health care services through the increased quality and quantity of information available to them. This increased availability will foster competition amongst health care providers and pharmacies to the benefit of the consumer. The health insurance provisions of the bill serve both Florida’s citizens and business community by making insurance more affordable and more available, and the health care quality and safety provisions improve further upon what we take pride in as one of the finest health care systems in the country.

Electronic Mail Communications Act Signed into Law

During the 2004 Legislative Session, the Florida Senate worked diligently on legislation that would protect Florida’s citizens from bothersome electronic mail containing false or misleading information, also known as “spam.”

Email and other forms of electronic mail have become an important mode of communication in the past few years. This process has made people’s lives easier and more efficient, but has also opened the door to bothersome email messages that flood their mailboxes. Not only does this “spam” mail cause problems for individuals, but it also hinders businesses’ ability to communicate and carry out their daily operations.

The “spam” bill makes it illegal to use someone else’s Internet domain name without their permission. It also prohibits electronic mail that contains incorrect information in the subject line or mail that has false information in the message which is designed to mislead or cause damage to the recipient’s computer or other receiving device. The Attorney General is now allowed to bring civil action or to issue fines of \$500 to anyone found guilty of sending or assisting in the sending of “spam” mail. This bill will allow citizens of Florida more time to respond to emails and messages from family and friends without having to stress about deleting tiresome and tasteless mail. This bill also protects businesses from receiving destructive email that could potentially interrupt their communication network.

Mark your Calendars...

The sales tax holiday returns the week of **July 24-August 1, 2004**. No sales tax will be collected on the sale of clothing, wallets, or bags, including handbags, backpacks, fanny packs, and diaper bags with a selling price of \$50 or less or on the sale of school supplies priced \$10 or less.

And this year during the **entire month of August**, the gas tax levied by the State of Florida will be reduced by 8 cents per gallon.

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WE'RE HERE TO HELP YOU!

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